THE FAINT RECOLLECTION OF EDEN

September 7, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"So God created man in his own image...male and female..."
--Genesis 1:27 (RSV)

Scripture
Genesis 1:24-31

There is an old New Yorker cartoon which shows Adam and Eve being driven out of the Garden of Eden by an angel with a flaming sword. Adam is say to Eve: "My dear, we live in an age of transition." [See The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, Ed. by Robert McAfee Brown, p. xix.]

Who you are can be defined, at least in part, in terms of where you are from. To know yourself is to know and to affirm your roots. Alex Haley taught us that.

Last Saturday a wonderful event happend, to illustrate that point again, at Somerset Place, a large plantation in North Carolina. Dorothy Redford, Portsmouth, Virginia, spent a decade of painstaking research to discover the identities of all the original slaves at somerset Place. She contacted the more than 2,000 descendants of those slaves and last Saturday there was a family reunion at the place, the plantation. "They are," Mrs. Reford said, "people who have never been home before." Time magazine editoralized: "The day's highlights can only be the discoveries, surprises, delights, touchings and twinges that are bound to occur among people newly aware that they spring from a common past..." When the Time reporter asked Mrs. Redford how she felt when she discovered the 1796 bill of sale that actually verified the whole thing she responded: "With the past opening up, you feel more complete, you feel whole...homecoming (is) a healing." [Time, 9/1/86, p. 21]

Who you are is defined at least in part by where your home is.

Who you are as a human being is an important question. People who think about us and study us are saying that there is no more important question than the human one: that as we move into the brave and dangerous new world of high technology and all that implies, our survival depends on having some sense of who we are as human beings.

Who are you? The question can be answered scientifically in terms of your component elements, your bodily parts and your genetic structure. It can be answered politically, economically and artistically, sexually. How you define yourself is, in fact, revealed by the way you relate to other people, how you dress, how you make your ethical decisions.

The Judeo-Christian answer to the question "Who are you," begins with

where you are from, where your home is. You are first and foremost and essentially a child of God. You belong to God. Your truest home is that place the primal story calls Eden.

That is the point of one of the most remarkable passages of scripture, largely mininterpreted and misunderstood, the opening section of Genesis. The misguided but zealous attempt to make Genesis into a history book, or worse yet, a science book, ends up missing its meaning and most of its power.

The historians tell us that the story of creation was written down during the Exile, when Israel was being held captive in Babylon. It was a time when people were inclined to doubt that God even existed. The future looked grim; the people of Israel in exile seemed like an insignificant speck of dust in the wide desert of Babylonian and Assyrian and Egyptian power politics. Genesis 1 is a bold proclamation to those people in captivity about who they are and to whom they belong - where their home really is - even while they are in Exile.

What Genesis said to them and to us is: You are a child of God, created by God.

-you are being created for a purpose;

-you are the crowning achievement of creation.

-you are created in God's image; not in the way you appear, your shortness or tallness, not your race or your gender, but the freedom and responsibility that are yours alone in creation: in your capacity for love and beauty and ecstacy you are a reflection of God.

The story continues to define us in terms of our consistently missing the mark. We do not live up to the image which is in us and are not free and responsible. We do not live in our home, but East of Eden. And finally - Genesis - anticipates the Gospel, in fact, begins to tell the Good News with he wonderful assertion that the memory of Eden is always with us: that our departure from the Garden is mixed with tenderness and grace. For even as the man and the woman leave the Garden, the creator is weaving clothes for them, seeing to their care, tenderly loving them. They cannot live in the Garden, but the love of the creator, the continuing relationship and the memory of Eden will always bless them.

It was a revolutionary word to people in captivity. It was radically good news and it still is. Dr. Fred Craddock in a new book for preachers urges us, eloquently, to ponder the people who listen to sermons:

"When God looked upon sky, sea and hills, God said, 'It is good.' When God looked upon man and woman, God said, 'This is like looking in a mirror; these are my image...'"

Some of us have forgotten that about ourselves. Some of us never knew it. But in all of us "there remains the faint recollection of Eden." [Preaching, p. 88]

That is what St. Augustine meant with those wonderful words: "Thou hast made us restless until we find our rest in you." It's what Jesus pointed to with description of God as Good Shepherd, woman looking for lost coin, father running down road to meet child returning.

Our capacity for beauty, the gift for making beauty which some of us have so magnificently, the capacity for nobility and unselfishness and great love, come from that blessed memory of Eden within us. And yet we live in transition, East of Eden. In the remarkable motion picture Stand By Me, four 12 year old boys, at the end of the summer before their entry to Junior High School, go on a wonderful two day adventure. Each lives with ambiguity and unhappiness at home. One is abused, one lives with an alcoholic father, one is demeaned by parents, one is ignored. The real world is very real for them. But on their two day sojourn in an Eden-like wilderness, they confront life and death, their own frailities and their own wonderful capacity for learning and love and compassion. The story which was written by popular novelist Stephen King, is a confessional statement which speaks for all of us. We live in this world with a sense that there is another, better, world always tantalizingly close by. We live here and now but with a memory of something more, with a faint recollection of the fact that human life is capable of great beauty and joy and meaning.

We live on Michigan Avenue but with the memory of Eden in the back of our minds. As a race we can come up with an Albert Schweitzer and an Adolf Hitler in the same generation. We can build cathedrals and guided missels. We spend our treasure testing nerve gas and artificial hearts. The recent news replay of the downing of a Korean 747 by Russian fighter planes paraded a technology so precise we can sit in our homes and listen to the Russian pilot closing in at 35,000 feet, firing the missle, destroying the target, agonizing, aware of the limitations of humanity, not knowing the words to say or shout that will make him stop.

Who are we? Is the paradise of Eden a real memory or simply wishful thinking? There are two positions essentially...the high view and the low view. On the side of the high view - put the liberal vision of a humanity becoming more civilized, more human, with each generation, growing to new heights of compassion, justice, liberty and goodness. The high view has inspired us to work for the improvement of the human condition, to build houses and feed people and cure diseases. The high view is us at our best, the Renaissance view, Michelangelo's David, Shakespeare's Adulation...

"What a piece of work is man."

And the weakness of this view, inspiring as it is, is its myopia. The same humanity expressed in Albert Schweitzer and Mother Theresa is expressed far more modestly in most of us, and on occasion with great and real evil. Something about humanity is also expressed with each incident of ghastly terrorism.

Thus, the low view. Sigmund Freud said we are a product of deep, subconscious, mostly unmentionable impulses, and although we learn to behave appropriately most of the time, it is essentially a charade, a cover

for who we really are. Karl Marx suggested that we are driven by an economic determinism. Meanwhile the new biology is suggesting that we are the product of a genetic code hidden in our DNA and B. F. Skinner up at Harvard keeps insisting that freedom and will have nothing to do with it, and of course, from the distance of 2,000 years St. Paul keeps clamoring to be heard on the subject of sin and the war raging in his own members.

The Biblical view is that...we live in an age of transition. We remember the Garden of Eden. We cannot seem to forget whose we are and where home is. In terms of the ongoing debate between the high and the low view of humanity, the Bible holds both views simultaneously. The Bible holds out for the whole picture which includes the glory and the grime, the sublimity and the folly, the holiness and beauty and the sin and ugliness.

The late Reinhold Niebuhr helped several generations of Christians to understand the human condition in terms of a dialectic, a tension between the high and the low view of humanity. He taught a generation of post World War I idealists who thought that everything was going to get better and better in every way, that bad things begin to happen when people feel so good about themselves they cannot allow for evil. At the same time he warned against the cynicism which results when people feel so negatively about themselves that they do not aspire to anything higher than the lowest behavioral common denominator.

Who are we? The Marxist answer is that we are cogs in a larger gear, and that our purpose is to lose our identity for the sake of the state. The Fascist answer is that we are part of the folk, the race which exists to obey the leader. The culture in which we live abhores both of those answers but sometimes seems to suggest that we are essentially consumers, a market, with needs created by one segment of the system called advertising, to be met by another segment called manufacturing.

The Christian word is that we are more than that. We are creatures of God. We are, our oldest and wisest literature suggests, God's masterpieces.

To be human, in the idiom of the Bible, is to know about our significance and our insignificance. It is to find a place on a warm and clear summer night to lie down on the ground and look up into the sky, which is what I have always imagined the Psalmist doing, 3,500 years ago, when he wrote "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name...when I look at the work of thy hand - the moon and stars." I imagine him with his back on the ground, reminded of his humanity, his frailty by the pressure of his weight pressing into the dirt and the annoyance of the arthritis that makes lying like that on the hard ground not altogether comfortable, yet gazing into the incredible blackness and starry extravagance and almost in spite of himself asking in total wonder "who am I? In this incomprehensible vastness, how is it that I am who I am?"

Christianity wants us to know our humanity - and, at the same time, to expect much of humanity - including our own. Christian religion invites us to affirm the limitations; to know that we live outside Eden, that we are going to stumble and fall and fail sometimes, and also to affirm the potential, the possibility for greatness, the hope that is in us because of

the image of God in us, the memory of Eden within us.

Nowhere is that word about us clearer than in the one we know as the Word of God, Jesus the Christ.

Jesus told stories of a God who seeks people out precisely to remind them of who they are...a God like a Gook Shepherd.

Jesus, we believe, is the promise that God does not write us off when we fail to measure up...the same promise, the same bold assertion in that ancient account of the genesis of it all. Adam and Eve - all men and all women live with the memory of Eden. The deepest truth of all is that in Jesus Christ, God knows human sinfulness. God shows that human sinfulness, human failure, is covered, forgiven, recreated by the love and power that is at the heart of the whole creation. That is very good news if you are in exile and it is very good news for us.

It is good news if you feel lost, lonely, exiled in a foreign land - to know that you are not forgotten.

It is good news if you feel unimportant, insignificant - to know you are a child of God - his crowning achievement.

It is good news if you feel guilty, cut off, alienated, to know that your creator still loves and wants you to know where your true home is.

Who are we? We are part of God's creation: we are saints who fall, sinners who are forgiven: men and women who live in the here and now but who can't shake the memory of whose we are - the faint recollection of Eden.

No wonder the Psalmist ended, as he began:

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Lord God, we praise you for your creation: for the beauty and power and resilience of all you have made. We know our limitation. We know our sin. We know your forgiveness. We praise you for the promise and potential you have created in us: for your image which we bear secretly in our hearts every day of our lives. Lord God, we would be faithful to that image. Give us courage and strength and hope to exercise the dominion you have given us, the responsibility which is ours, in lives that are pleasing to you. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.